IMPORTANCE OF THE FALCON IN THE MIDDLE AGES.

Great attention was paid to the breed of falcons, and the office of falconer was one of importance and profit. Our ancestors distinguished not only the various species, but the smaller varieties of the tribe, calling each by its separate name, as the kestrel, the ger-falcon, the lanner, the merlin, &c. They are distinguished from the meaner kinds of the same family, the kites and buzzards, by the length of the wing-feathers, which enables them to fly with great swiftness, while the short-winged buzzards and kites are heavy and slow in comparison. The falcons are also more courageous and more teachable than the meaner birds of prey.

THE GOSHAWK (Plate xv., e)

Is a handsome bird, though he does not belong to the “generous” or “noble” tribe of falcons, his wings being too short to entitle him to that rank. But he is a courageous handsome bird, very fierce and predatory, and a great pest to the farmyard. He may be trained like the nobler falcons, though he will never equal these in speed and docility. Buffon, the naturalist, once kept a couple of these hawks together for some months, but they never showed any affection for each other, and at last the male killed the female in an access of fury.

THE GER-FALCON (Plate xvi., a)

Is nearly as large as the osprey, and is said to have been originally brought from Iceland and the northern parts of Europe. He is a beautiful bird, the greatest of the falcon tribe, and likewise the most generous and docile. Accordingly, in the days when lords and ladies rode out to enjoy the sport of falconry, while other and meaner kinds of falcons were trained to pursue the smaller birds, the ger was started at the lordly heron, whose sharp beak would soon have proved fatal to an assailant of less courage and address. The stork and the crane, large and formidable birds, likewise fall victims to the ger-falcon. Strange to say, the female of the falcon tribe was always preferred, for purposes of the chase, to the male; for, contrary to the general rule, according to which the male bird is superior in size and brilliancy of plumage to the female, among the falcons the female is always the larger and handsomer bird; and thus the male was called by the falconers a tiercelet, which signifies that it is a third smaller than the female.

THE BUZZARD (Plate xvi., b)

Is a dull heavy bird of its kind, common enough in the English forests, where it frequently takes possession of an old crow’s nest, which it lines with wool, and then it lays its eggs, and brings up its young in the ill-earned domicile. Goldsmith, in his “Natural History,” gives the following account of the buzzard: “He is a sluggish, inactive bird, and often remains perched whole days together upon the same bough. He is rather an assassin than a pursuer; and lives more upon frogs, mice, and insects, which he can easily seize, than upon birds which he is obliged to follow. He lives in summer by robbing the nests of other birds and sucking their eggs, and more resembles the owl kind in his countenance than any other rapacious bird of day. His figure implies the stupidity of his disposition; and so little is he capable of instruction from man, that it is common to a proverb to call one who cannot be taught, or continues obstinately ignorant, a ‘buzzard.’ The honey-buzzard, the moor-buzzard, and the hen harrier are all of this stupid tribe, and differ chiefly in their size, growing less in the order I have named them. The goshawk and sparrow-hawk are what Mr. Willoughby calls short-winged birds, and consequently unfit for training, however injurious they may be to the pigeon-house or the sportsman. They have been indeed taught to fly at game; but little is to be obtained from their efforts, being difficult of instruction and capricious in their obedience.”